New West, True West: Interpreting the Region's History

DONALD WORSTER

Frederick Jackson Turner started historians down a muddy, slippery road that ultimately leads to a swamp. That destination was not apparent for a long while. The route signs Turner put up had a deceptively concrete
the DEMO VERSION of CAD-KAS PDF-Editor (http://www.cadkas.com).
promise to them. In a letter written in the 1920s, he pointed out that "the 'West' with which I dealt, was *a process* rather than a fixed geographical region." . . .

When you are lost, the most sensible strategy is to go back to the point of departure, back where Mr. Turner once stood pointing the way, and look for another road. Ignore the signs saying, "[t]his way to process," and look instead for the one reading, "[T]o a fixed geographical region." Or better yet. look for the specific processes that went on in the specific may grope and argue a lot along that way too, but we won't end up back in Massachusetts befuddled by Puritan theology or back with the Crusaders defeated and dead.

My strategy of diverging from Turner and his frontier theme is hardly original. It was implicitly recommended almost thirty years ago, in a 1957 article published in *Harper's Magazine,* by a man then described as "the West's leading historian," Walter Prescott Webb. The article was entitled "The American West: Perpetual Mirage." Had it been taken more fully to heart, it might have started the field off in a more promising direction. There was absolutely nothing in it of Turner's vaporous notion of the West as frontier advance. On the contrary, Webb gave the West a set of firm coordinates on the North American landscape. In his second paragraph he declared.

> Fortunately, the West is no longer a shifting frontier, but a region that can be marked off on a map, traveled to, and seen. Everybody knows when he gets there. It starts in the second tier of states west of the Big River.

the DEMO VERSION of CAD-KAS PDF-Editor (http://www.cadkas.com).
The West, in other words, begins with the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. So defined, the West would become, along with the North and South, one of the three great geographical regions of the coterminous United States.

In Webb's view, what sets this western region off from the other two major regions is the lack of enough rainfall to sustain traditional, European-derived agriculture. In that second tier of states the average yearly precipitation falls below the twenty-inch minimum needed to grow crops in the accustomed way. From there to the California coast the region is mainly dry: in its extremes it is a desert, elsewhere it is a subhumid environment. Admittedly, within it are some anomalies and further diversities—the Pacific northwest coast outstanding among them—which, for the sake of

"New West, True West: Interpreting the Region's History," by Donald Wormer, *Western Historical Quarterly,* 18 (April 1987), pp. 141-156. Copyright by Western History Association. Reprinted by permission."

DEMO VERSION of CAD-KAS PDF-Editor (http://www.cadkas.com).
analysis, Webb had to ignore. Every region is, after all, only a
and is subject to exceptions.

This more mappable West, as everyone in the field knows, was an idea Webb took from the nineteenth-century explorer John Wesley Powell, whose *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States,* published in 1878 as a House of Representatives document, identified the 100th meridian as the line roughly dividing a humid from a subhumid America. Webb nudged the line eastward a couple of degrees so it lay right outside Austin, Texas, where he lived. And he boldly declared that Powell's arid region was one and the same as the American West. For the post-World War Two generation, he sensed, the two regions had merged completely, and historians had better acknowledge the fact and stop harking back to Turner.

I know in my bones, if not always through my education, that Webb was right. His notion of the West as the arid region of the country fits completely my own experience and understanding. Born eighty years to the day after Frederick Jackson Turner—on the 14th of November, 1941 (Turner was born on the 14th of November, 1861)—I have never been able to think of the West as Turner did, as some process in motion. Instead, I think of it as a distinct place inhabited by distinct people: people like my parents, driven out of western Kansas by dust storms to an even hotter, drier life in Needles, California, working along the way in flyblown cafes, fruit orchards, and on railroad gangs, always feeling dwarfed by the bigness of the land and by the economic power accumulated there. In my West, there are no coonskin caps, nor many river boats, axes, or log cabins. Those
DEMO VERSION of CAD-KAS PDF-Editor (http://www.cadkas.com).
things all belong to another time, another place—to a wet, eastern land where nature offered an abundance of survival resources near at hand. My West is, by contrast, the story of men and women trying to wrest a living from a condition of severe natural scarcity and, paradoxically, of trying to survive in the midst of entrenched wealth.

This picture of the West, I submit, is the closer to the one most western historians carry around in their heads today. When pushed hard to make a stand, we usually line up with Webb and Powell, not Turner. For instance, on the first page or so of the introduction to his book *Historians and the American West,* Michael Malone grants that he means by the West more or less what Webb meant: "the entire region lying west of the 98th meridian, the line of diminishing rainfall which runs from the eastern Dakotas on the north through central Texas on the south." But having admitted that much to ourselves, we often resist the logical implications in what we have done. We still feel obliged to keep feeding Turner's ghost at the table. We may accept the modern view that the West is a settled region distinct unto itself, but we are not always steadfast, clear-minded regionalists in writing its history.